

# The Photographic Error as a Strategy in Belgian Conceptual art.

## The Case of Jacques Lizène

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### *Abstract*

Since the 1970s Belgian artist Jacques Lizène (b. 1946) calls himself “Minor late mid-twentieth-century Master of Liège, Artist of the Mediocre and Unimportant.” As this dubious title suggests, the idea of failure is central in his oeuvre. Through performative photo works, in which he often acts himself, Lizène questions the role and the image of “the artist” on the one hand, and the functioning of the photographic medium on the other. Photographic “errors,” or strategies that run counter to the formalist aesthetic norms within photography, are used for a medium specific inquiry.

### *Résumé*

Depuis les années 1970, l'artiste belge Jacques Liézène (né en 1946) s'autoproclame « Petit Maître liégeois de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, Artiste de la médiocrité, comme art d'attitude ». Comme ce titre le laisse entendre, la notion d'échec est centrale dans son oeuvre. À travers ses performances photographiques dans lesquelles il se met régulièrement en scène, Lizène interroge d'un côté, le rôle et le statut de l'artiste, et d'un autre, le fonctionnement du médium photographique. Les “erreurs” photographiques, comme stratégies allant à l'encontre des normes de l'esthétique formaliste, sont mises au service d'une recherche sur la spécificité du médium.

### *Keywords*

Jacques Lizène, Conceptual art, photography, failure, error

Jacques Lizène, art conceptuel, photographie, échec, erreur

Within Conceptual art the photographic error and the idea of artistic failure in general is a recurrent element. As seen in, for example, John Baldessari's *Throwing four balls in the air to get a square (best of 36 tries)* (1974) or Ed Ruscha's deadpan depiction of Los Angeles in the 1960s, Conceptual photography goes against formalist photographic norms by neglecting compositional balance and embracing chance and even failure, among other things. Another technique Conceptual artists often adopt is a subversive text-image combination, which shows the incapacity of photography to give truthful information. This paper addresses the work of the Belgian artist, Jacques Lizène (b. 1946), who in the 1970s worked in the Conceptual vein and is a particular case in point when it comes to the theme of the photographic error and the idea of artistic failure in general.

Since the late 1960s Lizène lives and works in Liège, a provincial capital in the French speaking southern part of Belgium. Situated between important artistic centers like Cologne, Düsseldorf, Amsterdam, and Paris, in the 1970s there was a small but vivid contemporary art scene in Liège, since it was the operating base of artists like Jacques Charlier and members of the artists' group CAP, including Jacques Louis Nyst, Jean-Pierre Ransonnet and Jacques Lizène, but also of gallery owner and editor, Guy Jungblut. In 1969 Jungblut had founded the avant-garde art gallery Yellow Now, in which as of 1972 he exclusively featured photo-based work. In 1973, a year before the gallery's closure, Jungblut established a publishing house with the same name, Yellow Now. In the 1970s and 1980s, the publishing house, which still exists today, specialized in the publication of artists' books. These books often include photo-text works by artists such as Annette Messager, Didier Bay, Jochen Gerz, Paul-Armand Gette, and Jean Le Gac, among others. Interestingly, it was also Yellow Now that published one of the few publications entirely devoted to the theme of the photographic error, Clément Chéroux' *Fautographie. Petite histoire de l'erreur photographique* (2003). In this book Chéroux claims that a form of knowledge is possible through the error; that the failures, the accidents, the lapsus of photography can be used as cognitive instruments. (Chéroux 2003: 16-17) And indeed, the complex, versatile, sly nature of failure, which makes the work difficult to grasp, is probably exactly the reason why many conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, including Jacques Lizène, used it as an artistic tool. It became a strategy to question and shake up artistic (and social) standards.

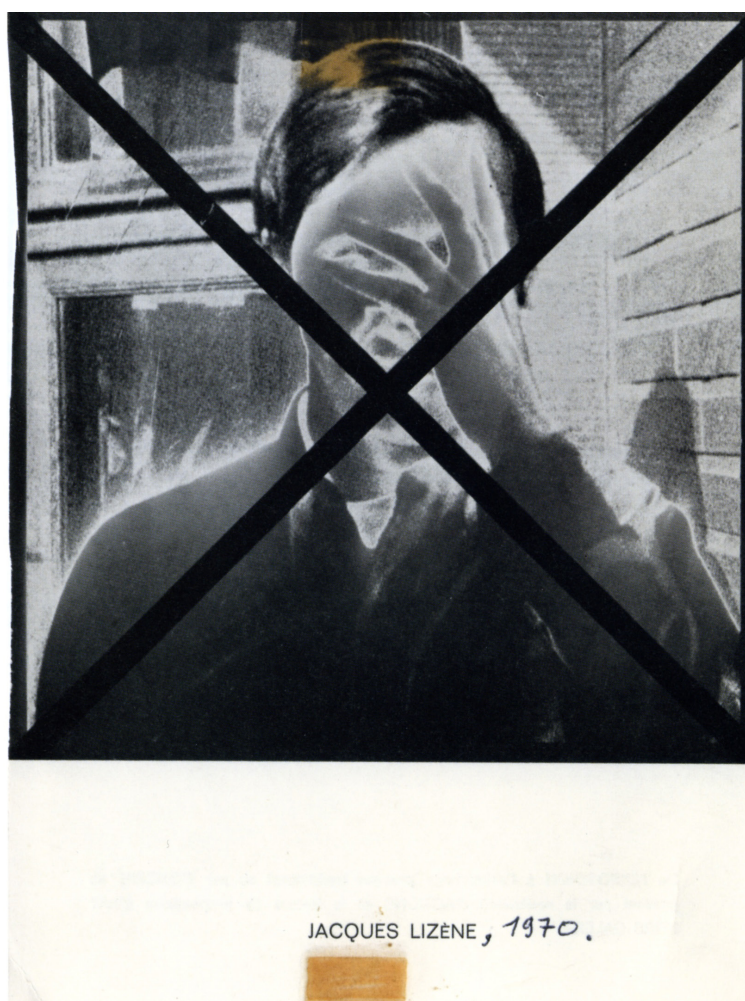
In the case of Lizène, the idea of the error even reaches beyond the artistic, for it characterizes his entire view of life. Following the nihilistic theories of Emil Cioran, of whom Lizène read *Précis de décomposition* (1949) and *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973), Lizène believes that life itself is in fact an error. (E-mail exchange with Jean-Michel Botquin, April 2017) This stance is particularly evident in his exhibition *Voles clos. Hommage à la non-procréation* (1969) at Yellow Now, where next to his "dead window" (a window put against the wall offering no perspective), he put the following sentence on the wall: "If I was given the power to gently extinguish all [forms of] life, I would perhaps not hesitate one moment. (Lizène)" In the same vein he decided to undergo a vasectomy, for which in an interview with Denis Gielen he gives the following explanation: "...I am convinced that one day we will discover that life has been developed by error; that life and nature are the result of an error which multiplies and complexifies. So, as a matter of principle, I say: 'Me, I stop, as I can.'" (Gielen, 2003: 52)

Derived from this pessimistic outlook on life the artist Jacques Lizène calls himself "Minor late mid-twentieth-century Master of Liège, Artist of the Mediocre and Unimportant." This self-invented title implies a persistent, programmatic refusal to make high art. As life is an error, everything he does as an artist is meant

to be an error too. Failure is thus at the heart of his oeuvre; it is deliberately sought out. However, Lizène's failures are much less explicit than, for example, Bas Jan Ader's well-known series of falls. In everything he does, Lizène claims to be mediocre, average. He neither aims for total fiasco, nor for success, but chooses the in-between. For Lizène, a work of art that is neither really good, nor really bad, is perfect. In the following examples we will examine how the artist realizes his work by means of "photographic errors," or strategies that run counter to the formalist aesthetic norms within photography.

### Three Self-portraits

To begin with, we take a close look at three photographic self-portraits, which Lizène created between 1970 and 1980.<sup>1</sup> The first one is printed on the cover of the brochure of his solo exhibition, entitled *Art Spécifique*, at Apiaw in Liège in 1970.



*Jacques Lizène, Cover of the brochure of the exhibition Specific Art [Art Spécifique], Apiaw, Liège, 1970. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.*

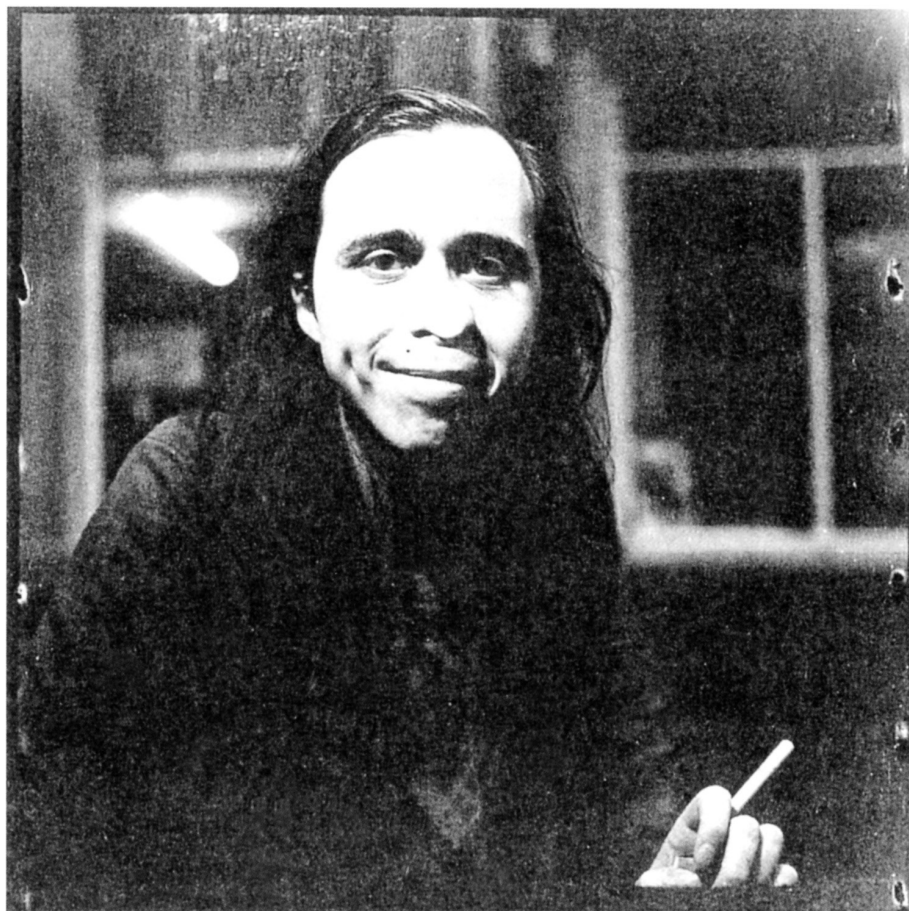
It includes a negative print of a photographic self-portrait in which the artist hides his face with his left hand. The entire composition is then crossed out with a large "X" in black. The crossing out reminds of a typical action by photographers, who cross out the failed images on their contact sheets. Lizène, by contrast,

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Lizène never made a photographic or filmed image himself, but always let someone else (often Guy Jungblut) make the image according to his idea.

published the crossed out portrait and thus transformed the rejected image into the succeeded. Moreover, in his first catalog raisonné, *Tome II (Tome I est introuvable)*, published in 1990, he declared that this picture was his “first photographic work.” (Jacques Lizène, 1990: 52)

By using a “deleted” image, but also by presenting a negative image, which is usually not the final stage of a photograph, Lizène obviously reacts against conventional art photography. In addition, by hiding himself behind his hand and, subsequently, even deleting his self-image by crossing it out, he also dissociates himself from the modernist credo in which authorship prevails. It expresses an authorial invisibility, fostered within Conceptual art in order to sustain art’s self-referential status. However, although hidden, Lizène’s “first photographic work” does include his self-portrait. Moreover, the use of his own body as performing figure would become the trademark of his following photo works—although always in a deliberate “mediocre,” self-mocking way. Ultimately, the hesitation between negation and affirmation of the self-portrait can be understood as a strategy to make mediocre art.

The second self-portrait, *The Minor Master from Liège Pressing his Nose against the Surface of the Photograph*, is the first work of the series *The Perceived and the Not-Perceived* [Le Perçu et le Non-perçu, which was created in 1972 and 1973.



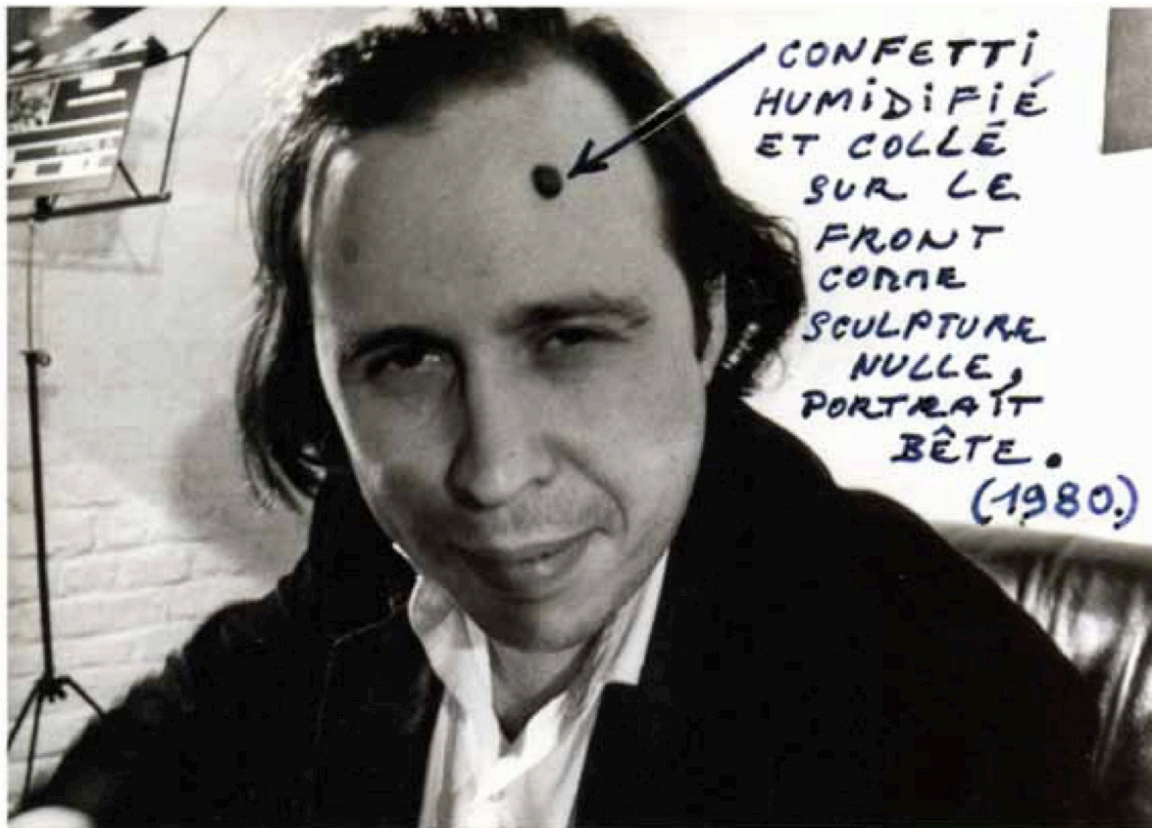
Jacques Lizène, *The Minor Master from Liège Pressing his Nose against the Surface of the Photograph* (*The Perceived and the Not-Perceived*), 1972-73, black-and-white photograph. © Jacques Lizène -  
Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vienne, Liège.

In this series the photographic mechanism is shown, analyzed and questioned in a humorous way. In the aforementioned catalog raisonné, the artist asserted that “the surface of the photo was actually a window” and



thus he qualified the image as “a mediocre joke.” (*Jacques Lizène*, 1990: 31) This silly, superfluous statement, nevertheless, makes the viewer conscious of the camera lens as a screen that separates the photograph from reality. Lizène’s remark also reminds the viewer of the fact that what is shown is not reality but an (indexical) image of reality, and thus goes against the traditional belief in “photographic truth,” or photography being “a window to the world.”

The third image, *Moistened Confetti Stuck on Forehead as Worthless Sculpture, Stupid Portrait* (1980), includes a picture on which the artist has written a comment.



*Jacques Lizène, Attitude Art: Confetti Stuck on Forehead as Worthless Sculpture, Stupid Portrait, 1980, black-and-white photograph, text written on the photograph with permanent marker. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.*

Within the realm of art photography, the very act of writing on a photograph points to the fact that the artist considers the work as worthless—which is reaffirmed by the inscription itself, saying “stupid portrait.”

All three self-portraits respond to the idea of the photographic error in that they include a subversion of the traditional genre of the self-portrait, especially by *breaking the fourth wall*, so to speak. Against photography’s attractive capacity of creating an illusion of reality, Lizène’s pictures blatantly expose the photographic screen. They uncover the mechanisms of photography regarding perception, and, by doing so they criticize classical photographic standards and aesthetics. In addition, the rather awkward, sometimes foolish ways of depicting himself goes against the self-confident modernist image of the “artist as genius.”

## The Minor Master and the Frame

In 1971, Lizène created a work that includes two photographs, the frames of which cut the portrait of the artist in half.



*Jacques Lizène, Minor Master from Liège Hesitating Before Entering the Frame of One Photo or the Other, 1971, 2 black-and-white photographs. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.*

At first glance, the “diptych” comes across as a combination of two failed portraits, generated by a very clumsy photographic framing going right through the body of the artist. Besides the half figures the images depict a rather uninteresting brick wall and stone floor. The title of the work, however, transforms the “photographic failures” into a conceptual work that highlights the frame as a medium specific characteristic: *Minor Master from Liège Hesitating Before Entering the Frame of One Photo or the Other*. The “wrong” framing is not a mistake but part of a conscious strategy to focus on the picture frame and burst the photographic illusion.

The work is part of a group of works from 1971, which all center on the photographic frame. In each work, the pictures are inextricably bound up with their titles, which describe the absurd performances represented in the pictures. For instance, *Forcing the Body to Fit Inside the Photo Frame* consists of a series of thirty self-portraits that gradually picture the change from a standing to a kneeling position. In each image, the camera zoomed closer and closer to the artist, forcing him to bend down increasingly until he appears totally contained by the framing of the camera. Others include: *Minor Master from Liège Having Attached His Tie to the Photo Frame*, showing a full portrait of the artist whose tie indeed seems to be attached to the right upper corner of the photograph; *Minor Master from Liège Entering the Frame of a Photo*, in which the artist pops up in the right part of the picture merely showing the upper part of his body; and *Minor Master from Liège Joyously Entering the Frame of a Photo*, which consists of two photographs showing the artist entering the frame of the picture while smiling.



By focusing on the photographic frame, Lizène also focuses on the borders of the image, and—in a metaphorical way—on the borders of art. The *Minor Master* from Liège does not place himself in the center, but rather on the margin. Through his focus on the marginal, the peripheral, the unimportant becomes important.

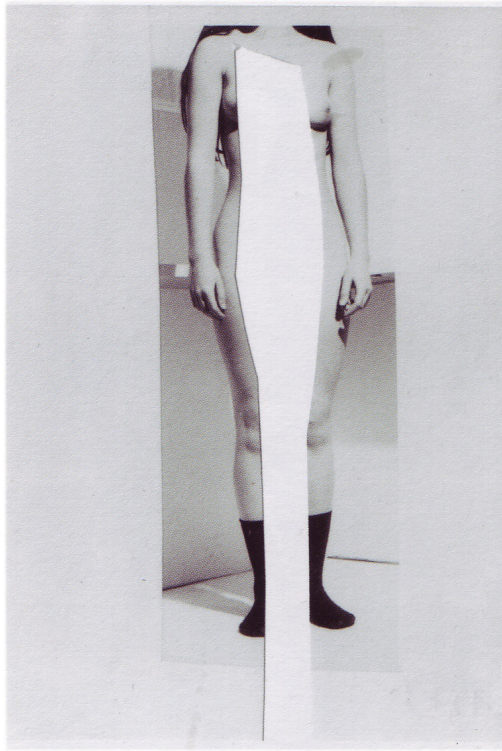
Interesting within the context of this article is a film variant of *Forcing the Body to Fit Inside the Photo Frame*, entitled *A Film Crossed Out Manually* (1972). Originally, Lizène wanted the film camera to register his moving body from a standing to a kneeling position while his head and feet just touch the picture frame. When after the shooting, he discovered that his head did not always touch the upper border of the image and that his feet fell outside the frame, he considered it to be failed and then decided to cross out manually each image of the film. Thus he “made a work out of disqualification.” (Botquin, 2009: 47) Here, in the end, the error has become the essence of the work.

In a few works from 1973, Lizène continues to work on the theme of the border by effacing the “core” of the image. For example, a picture from the series *Borders of Things* depicts a car in the street in front of store windows.



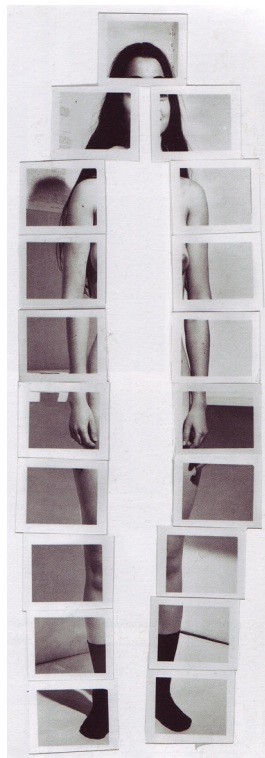
Jacques Lizène, *Borders of Things*, 1973, black-and-white photograph. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.

However, whereas a classical street photograph would focus on the object of the car (and its occupants), Lizène erased the car for the most part, solely leaving its outline. Another work, *Borders of the Body*, only shows the contour of a female nude, whose head is also cut off by the frame.



*Jacques Lizène, Borders of the Body, 1973, black-and-white photograph. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.*

Parts of the upper body, the pubic area, and half of the legs are “censored” by a white piece of paper, which makes the usual enjoyment of the female nude problematic. Finally, a work, entitled *Borders of the Body in Photo Collage*, consists of a “reconstruction” of the profile of a female nude by means of a collage of photos, each of them depicting a part of the body’s outline.



*Jacques Lizène, Borders of the Body in Photo Collage, 19 black-and-white photographs. © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.*



Considered within the paradigms of traditional nude photography and street photography, Lizène's images "fail." By removing the inner part of a body or an object, the artist violates the conventional depiction of a figure and hinders an easy reading of the image. The deliberate descriptive failure draws our attention to the fact that we are looking at an image, that what we see is mediated. Moreover, the mere description of the figure's borders paradoxically makes what is missing more present, and also encourages us to mentally fill in the figure.

## Deliberate Failure

The theme of failure and the use of performance are characteristics that link Lizène's work to the "Conceptual canon." Works like Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in My Studio* (1966) or Bas Jan Ader's photographs of his "falls," such as *Broken Fall (Geometric)*, *Westkapelle, Holland* (1971), by means of which he challenges the ideal of the heroic master, align with Lizène's expressions of failure and his self-mocking attitude. However, the resemblance between Lizène's work and that of Nauman or Ader is rather based on coincidence, since Lizène states he never met one of these artists nor knew their work at that time. More direct artistic references are likely to be found in Brussels Surrealism on the one hand, and the Fluxus movement on the other.

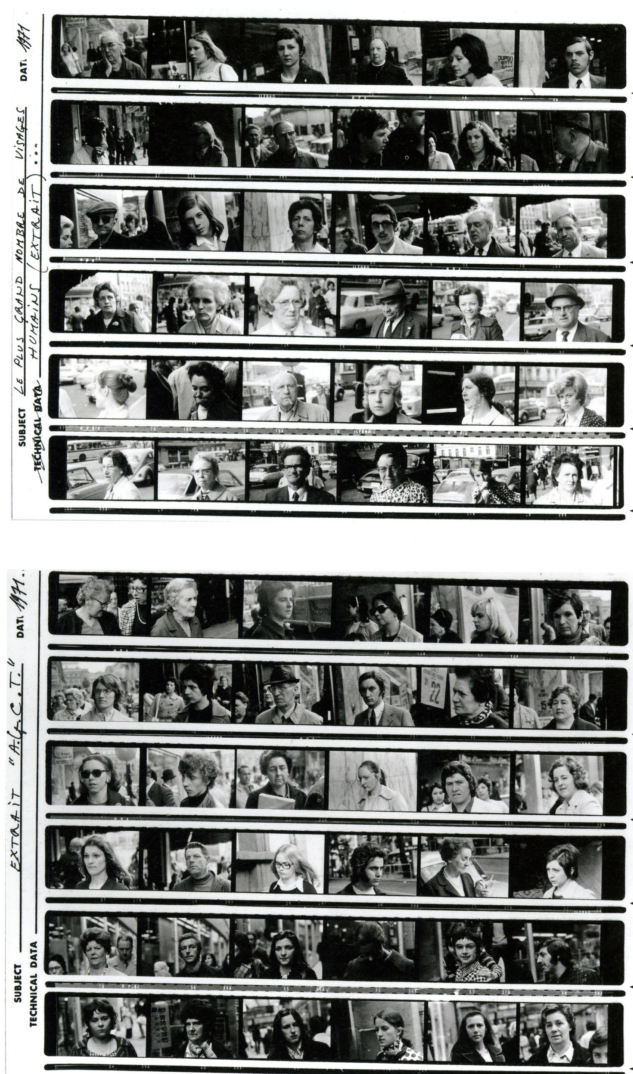
Lizène's practice as "Minor late mid-twentieth-century Master of Liège, Artist of the Mediocre and Unimportant" is related to the spirit and attitude of the Brussels Surrealist group, with Paul Nougé, René Magritte, and the younger Marcel Mariën as key figures. For, one of their driving principles was a refusal to make "high art." As seen in, for example, Magritte's *période vache* or Marcel Mariën's vernacular artistic language, using pornographic material among other things, the Brussels Surrealists aimed at escaping the rules proclaimed by the bourgeois art world. Dedicated to the reunification of art and everyday life, they deliberately failed to meet high art prescriptions. In an interview, Lizène acknowledged his interest in Surrealism and Magritte's "manipulation of the image" in particular. (J. Lizène, Interview with the author, Liège, July 14, 2014.)

The dissolution of the dichotomy between art and life was also a key concept within the Fluxus movement. Fluxus performances often included very banal actions that were taken from daily life experience. They were characterized by simplicity, playfulness, the acceptance of chance, specificity, presence in time (ephemerality), and musicality (the idea that a work is conceived as a score, which can be executed by an artist other than the creator). (Friedman, 1989/1998: 247-251) Lizène's "performed photo works"—*Minor Master from Liège Hesitating Before Entering the Frame of One Photo or the Other*; *Minor Master from Liège Having Attached His Tie to the Photo Frame*; etc.—actually meet most of these characteristics. What differs, however, is Lizène's use of photography to capture the event in a very specific moment, which totally determines the content of the work and responds to the medium specificity of photography, which is, for example, defined by a frame.

The Fluxus artist with whom Lizène shows most affinity, is undoubtedly Ben Vautier, who, residing in Nice, was appointed by George Maciunas as the director of "Fluxus South." (Smith, 1998: 11) Not only do they share an admiration for Dadaïsm, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage; both their works are also permeated with irony and self-mockery. In the case of Ben, this is expressed in a constant alternation of claiming to

be the world's greatest genius and undermining his own claims. For example, he stated: "I want to be the greatest in not being great," and "I want to neutralize my ego in order to affirm my ego." (Lebeer, 1997: 145) His well-known text-based paintings include inscriptions such as "Art is useless/go home" or "I discovered something new in art, but I will not tell you about it; it is a secret." Ben and Lizène actually met in 1971 through gallery owner Daniel Templon in Paris but were already in correspondence with each other since 1969 through mediation of Guy Jungblut.

Similar to some examples within Conceptual art, Brussels Surrealism, and Fluxus, Lizène's nevertheless idiosyncratic oeuvre is embedded in the idea of failure as the only possible result of the production of a mediocre artist. A last illustration of this is the work *AGCT: Filming and Photographing as Many Human Faces as Possible. Work with Unfinished Vocation*. It includes an unfinished film, consisting of short shootings of people in the studio or on the street, and six contact sheets of black-and-white photographs showing street portraits of passers-by.



Jacques Lizène, *AGCT: Filming and Photographing as Many Human Faces as Possible. Work with Unfinished Vocation*, Project abandoned as from the discovery of certain works (of the same year) by the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (a little) and because of laziness (much) (fragment), 1971, 72 black-and-white photographs (contact sheets). © Jacques Lizène - Courtesy of Galerie Nadja Vilenne, Liège.

Lizène, who soon abandoned the project of “filming and photographing as many human faces as possible” as indicated in the title, added the following remark to the title: *Project abandoned upon the discovery of works (of the same year) by the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (a bit) and out of laziness (a lot)*. Thus, the artist claims that he invented the work completely independently from the American Conceptual artist, Douglas Huebler. In a similar vein to Lizène’s idea, Huebler’s work *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global*, which also dates from 1971, was intended to “photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.” (Huebler, 1997: 133) Although in both cases, the impossibility of achieving the aim of the project was part of it, Huebler still added to the accompanying text the clause “to the extent of his capacity,” through which he covers himself against the likely failure of the project, whereas Lizène immediately and laconically points at the fact that the work can only be unfinished and thus is condemned to fail. In addition, in the (unfinished) film part of the work, Lizène included all the takes, also those that are blurred, and thus failed in being accurate portraits. So even within the part that he did realize (the part of the project that did succeed), failure occurs and—according to Jean-Michel Botquin—attaches to the people’s portraits an “auratic or ghostly aspect.” (Botquin, 2009: 47)

The above examples show Lizène’s multiple use of photographic failures: crossing out an image, showing a negative image, writing or drawing on an image without any respect, cutting right through a figure, deleting the inner part of a figure, and considering a work accomplished while it is unfinished. These “errors,” as they are confined within formalist art photography, are deployed by Lizène as strategies to challenge photography’s claim to truth telling, and point at the actual functioning of the medium. The artist constantly reminds us that we are looking at a photograph, and not at the thing being photographed. In this way, we might conclude that the deliberate, explicit exposure of *the failure* of the photograph as a window to reality actually holds something of “*the truth*” about photography, its medium specificity.

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